FILE NAME: New York State & NY Times (NY)

DATE: 1971 July 18

DOC#: NY033

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: NYT Article - You'll Be All Right If You Just Stop Breathing

-- EARL UBELL
New York Times (1857-Current file); Jul 18, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2002)
pg. E6

Asbestos:

You'll Be All Right If You Just Stop Breathing

New Yorkers strolling along almost any midtown street in these 90-degree July days will often be greeted by a "snowfall:" white flakes glinting in the sun, tumbling out of the sky. If you scoop up some of the "snowflakes," and happen to have an electron microscope handy to examine them, you will find the white fluffs to be composed of millions of fibers of asbestos. Their source? Up among the rising bare girders of the building under construction overhead, asbestos is being sprayed.

Asbestos is intended to save lives by insulating girders against the heat of a fire, preventing the steel from bending like molasses before the occupants can escape from the upper floors. But the substance has a deadly side, as well. Studies conducted over the past few decades, reinforced by later research among men who work with the material, have provided strong evidence linking asbestos with cancer of the lung and abdomen. With asbestos, numerous researchers have induced various kinds of cancer in hamsters and in rats. And in recent months, the ubiquity of asbestos in the environment—in the air we breathe, in clothes, even in talcum powder—has caused increasing concern among many medical leaders.

Last week, the City Council moved to end one major source of asbestos pollution by banning its spraying throughout the city. The ban appeared as a section of the new air pollution control code; it was enacted essentially because earlier efforts by city air control officials to regulate the use of asbestos by building contractors had proved fruitless.

New York City last year set regulations to limit the escape of asbestos from spraying sites. The rules required that a contractor enclose the spraying areas with large plastic tarpaulins; he was also to vacuum each story twice and to be particularly careful when shoveling up the excess material.

During a recent visit to a construction site in company with Harold Romer, assistant commissioner in the Department of Air Resources, this writer saw piles of loose asbestos lying around on the sprayed floor, gaping holes in the tarpaulins and gusts of wind carrying clumps of the dry material into the street, where it lay like an early morning frost.

Mr. Romer's inspectors have handed out more than 250 summonses in the past year for such violations, and still the "snowflakes" fall. The reason: The courts fine offending contractors between $25 and $50 a violation, which bothers a multimillion-dollar contractor about as much as a mosquito bite bothers an elephant.

So now the City Council has banned asbestos spraying altogether. Contractors will have to apply the material as a paste—a much more expensive process—or shift to masonry as a heat retardant. Spraying may continue at buildings under construction only to next February.

One of the provisions of the law requires workers to wear masks while spraying is conducted. Many, it was found, fail to do so. Yet according to studies made by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff and his colleagues at the Division of Environmental Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, the chance that an asbestos worker will get lung cancer is seven or eight times as great as for the population as a whole. If he also smokes cigarettes, he is 92 times more likely to contract cancer than the average man.

The exact link between asbestos and cancer is not known. It is believed that since asbestos has the excellent property of absorbing other chemicals onto its surface (it is often used a filter), it may, once taken into the lung, hold cancer-causing chemicals in contact with cells for just that extra amount of time needed to set the cells on their rampage of wild, uncontrolled growth. Normally, the self-cleaning process of the lungs quickly ejects such cancer-causing material.

That most of us have our share of asbestos was indicated in tests conducted by Dr. Selikoff's group. In a series of consecutive autopsies, the tiny asbestos fibers (a million to the inch when laid side by side) were found in the lungs of 24 out of 28 New Yorkers. Apparently once the fibers enter the lungs, they stay there.

As evidence of the dangers attending asbestos has mounted, new indications of its omnipresence have emerged.

- The air of Manhattan, tested far from a construction site, contains six times as much asbestos as the air of Ridgewood, N.J. The fibers may come from the brake linings of automobiles as well as from windborn construction spray.

- Two weeks ago, Jerome Kretchmer, the city's Environmental Protection Administrator, called a press conference to say he had asked the Federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare to investigate asbestos that his department had found in baby talcum powder. Talcum, like asbestos, is a mineral and the two are often found together.

- A week earlier, it was revealed than an Italian maker of cloth had mixed asbestos with other fibers to take advantage of reduced import duty on fire-resistant materials. The cloth was tailored into coats, and Dr. Selikoff's laboratory discovered that wearers of such coats move in a cloud of asbestos dust.

- Numerous modern buildings that have already been sprayed with asbestos have large interior channels and chambers lined with the stuff. Those channels frequently provide the return from air-conditioning so that the surfaces offer up fibers to the air-conditioned air.

- Finally, there is the asbestos time bomb. All the sprayed buildings will be demolished in, say, 75 to 100 years. As the wrecking balls smash the masonry and the girders are dismembered, the air for miles around will be filled with a haze of asbestos dust.

Annual world asbestos production has increased from 500,000 tons in 1930 to more than 4 million tons today, a nine-fold rise. It has pervaded almost every major manufactured product. The City Council's ban on spraying is the first move to stop the July snowfall and to get asbestos under control.

—EARL UBELL

Mr Ubell is Science Editor for WCBS-TV News, New York.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.